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AUTHOR Edwards, Audrey T.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some theoretical background and practical guidelines for the teacher choosing literature concerned with human values. Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which postulates seven stages of development, is described, and a discussion on how literature can be used to further moral development at each stage is presented. Evaluation techniques discussed include assessing the level of moral development of both the audience and the literary characters. Samples of effective literature are also presented. (WR)

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Audrey T. Edwards

48 Case Avenue

Cranston, Rhode Island

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Selecting Books to Promote Moral Development

Session: Children's Literature to Promote Moral Development

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Kohlberg's method of promoting moral development, to be discussed below, was not designed for use with children's literature. The classic approach has been to use a concise one- or two-paragraph statement of a dilemma, written expressly for the purpose of touching off a group discussion. Children's literature does, however, have a contribution to make to moral development, whether it is used as a basis for discussion or as an experience in itself. It can enrich the moral education curriculum, adding literary and artistic value as well as showing character and action in more detail than a concise statement of a dilemma can supply. It also may have a special use for the child who takes little part in discussions or one whose stage of moral development is so different from that of his classmates that he would not profit from a discussion.

Not all books with moral themes work equally well with Kohlberg's method of promoting moral development. The most essential criterion for book selection is the presence of a genuine moral dilemma, to be discussed below. Other selection criteria include appropriate level of development of the story characters, appropriate level of the dilemma itself, familiarity of the moral problem, a match between moral level and literary level, and high literary quality.

A Genuine Moral Dilemma

Kohlberg and Turiel (5) recommend that children encounter genuine dilemmas which cannot be resolved by merely reciting slogans or "virtue-words." A true dilemma presents choices which appear real and difficult to the child. For example, the hero might have to choose between telling the truth and lying to protect a friend. The dilemma introduces conflict into the child's thinking, conflict between his

present stage of moral development and one which is more advanced. The child resolves this conflict by moving to a higher stage. It is important to be aware that "the pat little stories in school readers in which virtue always triumphs or in which everyone is really nice are unlikely to have any value in the stimulation of moral development," according to Kohlberg (5). One should also be aware that fables, although interesting as literature and worthwhile as statements of a particular culture's values, do not usually include dilemmas. In a fable, the reader does not need to agonize over a difficult decision to realize that "fine feathers do not always make fine birds" or "one good turn deserves another."

Appropriate Level: Story Characters

Kohlberg (4) indicates that people develop morally by coming into contact with moral reasoning one stage above that of their own thinking. From the conflict of stages comes moral advancement. It follows that if a child is to advance by reading or hearing literature, the thinking shown by the central characters should, ideally, be one stage above that of the child. For example, a child at Stage II (You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours) benefits by reading about people at Stage III (Good girls do this). If the characters' reasoning is two or more stages above that of the child, he simply will not understand it. If their moral reasoning is at or below the child's stage of development, he will understand but will not progress beyond his present stage as a result of the experience. In either case, a child who is choosing his own books for independent reading probably would be able to reject books at the wrong level and choose more appropriate ones, since children tend to select as "best" those statements of

moral thinking which are one stage above their own present functioning. The teacher can help, however, by making available a group of books likely to be somewhere near the child's present stage. For this purpose, it would be desirable to know what stages are most commonly found at the child's grade level. (It would, of course, be possible to be of more help to the child who is choosing books if one is able to determine on an individual basis his exact stage of development.) Another occasion for the teacher to be concerned with identifying the level of moral development of story characters is when planning to read to a group and/or have a group discussion of a story. Here again, the teacher would need to know what stage of development is most commonly found at that grade level or be prepared to do some assessment of her own pupils. In fact, the teacher's assessment would be more important in this case, since she would be selecting the books and could not rely on the child's ability to self-select appropriately. Kohlberg and Turiel (5) have given some indication of the stages most commonly found at some age levels. For example, among a group of ten-year-old American boys, about 70% of the moral statements were at Stage I or Stage II. For thirteen-year-olds, Stage III was the most used. It should be noted, however, that these stage-age norms may change over time, with higher stages found at a given age level, if Kohlberg's recommendations for moral education should become widely and successfully followed.

For the teacher who is attempting to sort books according to level of moral development of the central character, there seem to be no shortcuts. It is necessary to have at hand whatever book is being considered and a description of all the stages. Kohlberg and Turiel (5) give a concise description. One must first familiarize oneself

with the stages. One must then read the book for statements or actions by the main character indicating his or her moral maturity, comparing these indications to descriptions of the stages until the statements seem to fit a particular stage. Two suggestions made for interviewing students also apply to assessing book characters. First, avoid stereotyping someone on the basis of too little evidence, suggest Porter and Taylor (6). Look for several statements or actions relating to moral issues before classifying a character. Second, try to avoid seeing one's own values in a statement when they are not there, according to Colby (2). In addition, it may be helpful to read classifications by someone else to check the accuracy of one's own sorting. Broderick (1) discusses several books in relation to level of moral development of the central character. Her examples include Harry the Dirty Dog and The Story about Ping (Stage I); Johnny Tremain (movement from Stage II to Stage VI); Rabbit Hill (Stage III); And Now Miguel (movement from Stage III to Stage IV). She also mentions a shortage of books above Stage III and suggests a search of adult literature for such books.

Appropriate Level of Dilemma

The moral dilemma itself, as well as the thinking shown by story characters, should be appropriate to the audience in developmental level. Fenton, Colby, and Speicher-Dubin (3) note that "certain dilemmas are relatively inappropriate for use with students whose moral stage precludes consideration of the argument." If the alternatives and the arguments for them are too advanced, the child does not understand the conflict. For example, a doctor's decision about whom to save means something to a person at Stage IV, who recognizes that life

has value in itself. The decision is not a problem at Stage II, where the person to be saved is the one who can do the most for the doctor. If the problem is too simple, there is no conflict, only ready agreement on a solution. Fenton et al. suggest, however, that some dilemmas can be adapted by the teacher to make them appropriate in level.

Familiarity of the Moral Problem

It also is important that the moral dilemma presented be somewhat familiar to the child in his everyday life. For young children, the problem of dealing with a neighborhood bully would be a better choice than one about a doctor who must decide whom to save. The dilemma can, however, have a setting as fanciful as science fiction or as exotic to most of us as the world of bullfighting. What is crucial is that the child reader can identify with the hero in emotions and reasoning as he faces the dilemma of the story.

A Match Between Moral Level and Literary Level

Ideally, a story's moral sophistication and the complexity of language and plot should correspond. A story depicting characters at Stage IV engaged in a morally difficult dilemma can be fairly complex in plot and language and should have an adult setting. It should not give the impression of talking down to the reader. Kohlberg and Turiel (5) cite the teaching of high-level precepts using concrete terms as a classic error in moral education. Broderick (1) mentions Coatsworth's The Cat Who Went to Heaven as a mismatch between high moral level and juvenile literary level. The reverse situation--a depiction of characters at a low level of development solving a low-level dilemma, but told in a sophisticated vocabulary with a college or high school setting--may be useful for some audiences, since many teenagers

and even adults function at a fairly low level of moral development. In any case, a faulty match between moral level and literary level can be corrected if the teacher is willing to adapt the style of a story by rewriting or retelling it. The literary adapting may be worth the work, for a good dilemma is hard to find.

High Literary Quality

In promoting moral development, as in any other situation, it would be desirable to use books which satisfy the highest standards for good literature. There is excellent literature which is concerned with moral dilemmas. Universality and depth of theme are two criteria of literary excellence, so it is not surprising that these qualities are found in company with other good literary qualities. Some stories, however, are worthwhile in moral theme but are not written with a high level of artistry. One may feel justified in using them if they meet other criteria for a good dilemma, especially if they are at a moral level which is hard to find. "Non-literature" may also be justified if it allows moral education to dovetail with other school subjects: Fenton et al. (3) note that moral education fits especially well with a social studies curriculum, where it can be enriched by presentation in a broad social and historical context. Despite these reasons for using stories of less-than-ideal literary quality, high literary standards can be met much of the time.

The other criteria for book selection--the presence of a genuine moral dilemma, appropriate level of development of story characters, appropriate level of the dilemma, familiarity of the problem, and a match between moral and literary level--can be summarized as the choice of a genuine dilemma at the right moral level. The criteria are difficult to meet, partly because it is difficult to find them all

embodied in a single book, and partly because sorting books according to moral level calls for difficult decisions. All the same, literature which facilitates a child's development into a more moral person is worth the seeking.

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